

Our May meetings were abbreviated by three Town Meeting sessions and the Memorial Day holiday, but we were still productive.

The Budget

Continued uncertainty about the State budget situation and how that translates to local aid for Amherst led us to recommend to Town Meeting that FY10 budget consideration be postponed from the already-delayed June 1st to June 15th. The goal is for decision making to be based on the most accurate information possible, and with such extraordinary variation in local aid projections at each step of the State process, waiting longer was deemed to be the best course.

As the State situation is not only uncertain but bleak, the list of tiered cuts to the Town’s portion of the budget, as recommended by the Town Manager, is long and painful. It was with great regret for the necessary losses that the Select Board voted its unanimous support for a plan that cut more than one million dollars, including: elimination of funding for the equivalent of more than nine full-time positions, three being police officers (a grant may pay for these); reduced Fire Department overtime; reducing the Town’s share of employee health insurance premiums by increasing co-pay amounts; eliminating tax-funded payments to human service agencies and closing the much-loved War Memorial pool. The plan calls for additional unspecified layoffs to meet further revenue reductions.

Several Select Board members participated in the Governor’s Community Budget Forum at Town Hall, hosted by Housing and Economic Development Secretary Greg Bialecki. He outlined the State’s economic picture, and listened as attendees from across the region spoke in favor of new revenues and against painful cuts. Select Board members advocated for local options taxes and health care reform.

Looking to the future, the Select Board agreed to consider over the summer if and how it might play a role in determining priorities for Community Preservation Act funds and capital spending.

Committee Issues

Among the Select Board’s responsibilities is appointing members to Town committees. We began addressing materials that express appointment and reappointment policy, with terms expiring at the end of June. Our goal is to balance three needs: respect for those who have gained knowledge and experience through committee service; ensuring the right mix of skills among the membership; and giving new people an opportunity to serve. Consideration of the policy materials will continue. We also made three appointments to committees and approved one appointment by the Town Manager.

Presentations to the Select Board

Health Department Director Epi Bodhi and Dr. Barbara Love spoke of the grant-funded work that department has done on race, gender and class-based public health inequities. They discussed an upcoming screening and discussion on parts of the PBS documentary “Unnatural Causes,” which several Select Board members would later attend.

Dave Ziomek, Director of Conservation and Development, along with LSSE Director Linda Chalfant and Associate Planner Nate Malloy gave a detailed presentation of the updated draft Open Space and Recreation Plan. They sought letters of support from the Select Board and other bodies to accompany

the plan's submission to the State. An approved plan is a key factor in grant approval for conservation and recreation projects. We planned to offer an endorsement letter at our first June meeting.

Rail Service Advocacy

We approved the charge for the one-year "Save Our Stop" task force, which will advocate for Amherst's Amtrak stop, and analyze issues surrounding its potential closure. A public hearing in Northampton about proposed changes to local rail service was attended by a Select Board rep and the Town Manager, who spoke to Amherst's importance on the current north-south corridor, and for future east-west service.

Parades and Celebrations

Several Select Board members and the Town Manager took part in the annual Memorial Day parade and ceremony. Plans were made for participation in Hadley's upcoming 350th anniversary parade. Per the Fourth of July parade, the Select Board reaffirmed its desire for a compromise with that parade's private organizing committee on the issue of allowing marchers with political signs. Such a compromise would enable inclusion of the Town's public safety equipment in the parade – particularly desirable this year, because the retiring Police and Fire Chiefs were invited to be Grand Marshals.

Amherst's 250th and Hadley's 350th Anniversary Celebration committees were among the honorees at the Chamber of Commerce's annual awards dinner gala. Most of the Select Board, along with the Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager and other Town staff were on hand to pay tribute to these dedicated committees whose hard work is bringing so much pride and enjoyment to both communities.

Licenses, Letters and Logistics

The Select Board approved three Special Liquor Licenses. We sent a letter expressing the Town's support for using Federal stimulus funds to complete the Manhan Rail Trail. We approved a policy for distributing lawsuit proceeds to provide emergency shelter and fuel assistance. We elected Aaron Hayden to represent the Select Board at a Sister City celebration this fall in Kanegasaki, Japan.

Reports from the Town Manager

The Town Manager provided updates on recent activity including: swine flu concerns; an ambulance accident; progress toward a new Town vehicle use policy; helping Amherst College find a development partner for the Lord Jeffery Inn; neighborhood concerns about student rental issues; and the Kendrick Park Committee's work. He informed us about a grant being sought for public safety equipment, and read a letter from the Police Chief into the record, as the grant application requires. He spoke about events he attended, including: the swearing-in ceremony for new UMass Police Chief Johnny Whitehead; a DPW employee's retirement party; a Survival Center fundraiser; the Ultimate tournament; a benefit concert for Ride Buzz at Kendrick Park; and the anniversary benefit for "A Better Chance."